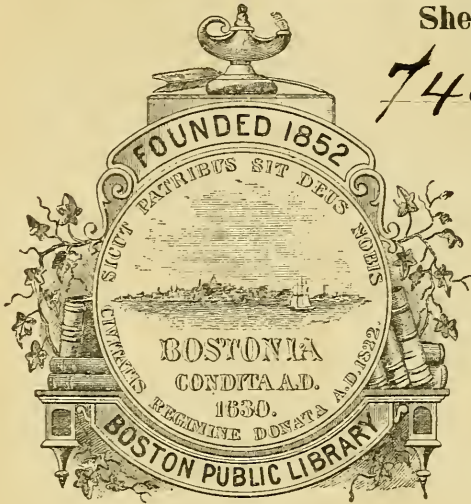


Shelf No

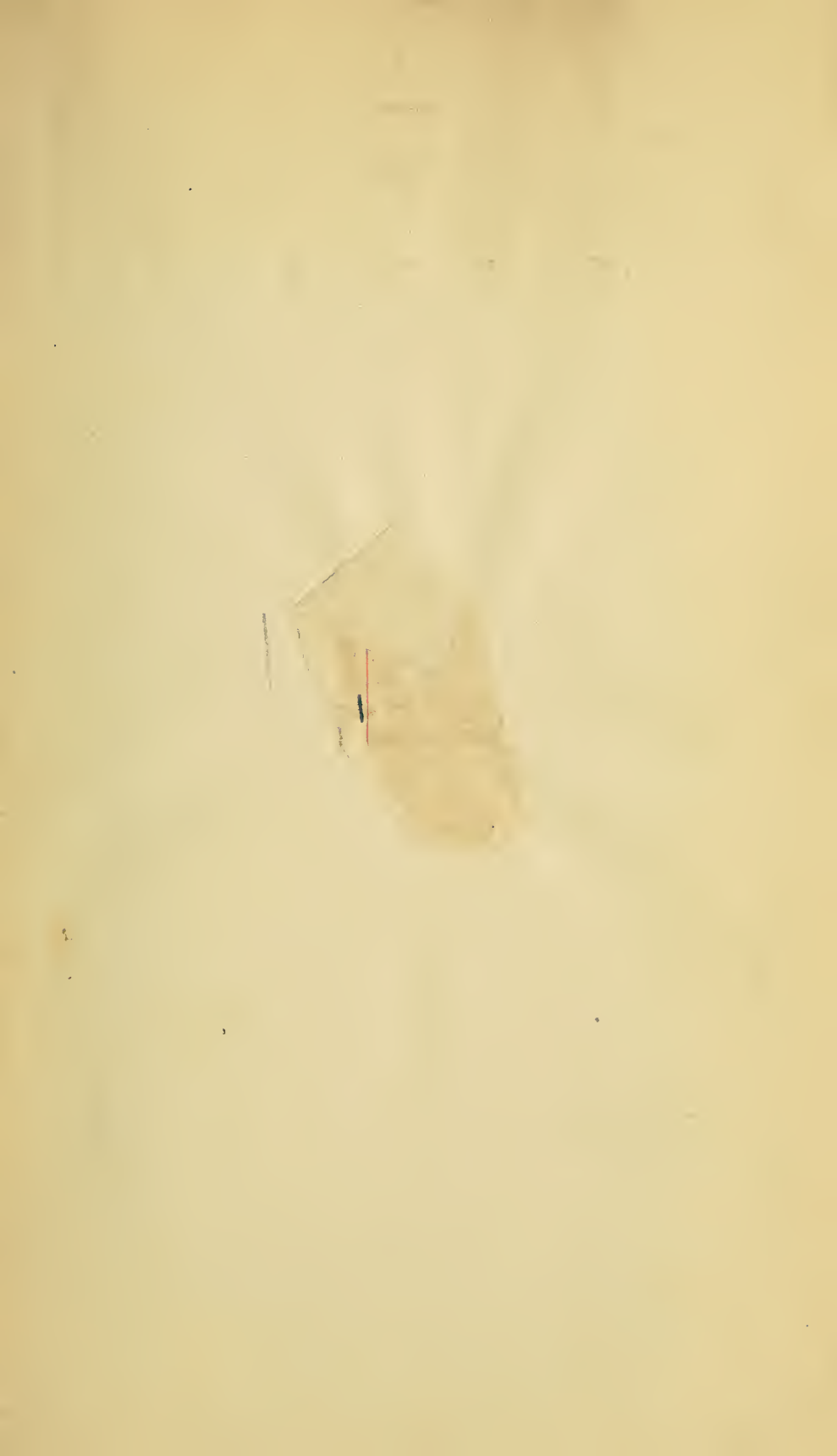
7459^a94




GIVEN BY

Dr. Francis H. Brown,

Sept. 30, 1895





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Boston Public Library

FREEDOM THROUGH LIMITATION

(Life Problem Series)

THOMAS VAN NESS

7459^a 94

The Second Church in Boston.
Copley Square



Dr. Francis H. Brown
Sept 30. 1895

YRABLI DLBIA

ENT TO

NOTES TO

FREEDOM THROUGH LIMITATION.

“When I am *weak*, then am I strong.”—PAUL.

“The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds.”—

Closing words of letter to the Colossians.

SOME ten or fifteen years ago, when I first read Emerson's essay on Compensation, it made upon me a deep impression, though I did not then know that what is there stated by the writer is scientifically accurate.

Plain and direct laws of the universe, such as those of gravity or hydrostatics, are not doubted by any one of ordinary intelligence, because their effects are so plainly to be seen, and cause and effect are immediately joined one to the other. The law of compensation equally with these is of God; and it must therefore be just as exactly true.

More and more, as we gain either in faith or in knowledge, do we know this to be so; yet probably there is no other universal law so much doubted, as it touches and influences human life, as is this one.

The reason for the wide-spread doubt is not hard to find. It grows out of the fact that usually the advantage for a dis-

advantage or limitation does not come at once, but only after many weary years of waiting, and then perhaps at a most unexpected moment. Again, the compensation is seldom returned in the kind of coin paid out; *i.e.*, in the particular manner we had hoped. Nevertheless, if we could, with the divine eye, see in a single instant the whole world and the best good of every human being in it, we should be able rightly to estimate the compensations given, and know that the payments from God's hand are exact and true.

Our text reveals to us Paul in a Roman prison. He has a chain on his wrist, and the other end of the chain is made fast to a Roman soldier. Writing is painful to him by reason of the condition of his eyes, and awkward on account of the chain on his wrist. What a sore limitation! Yet in those very surroundings, and largely on account of them, did Paul pen letters to certain Christian churches, long since disbanded, which are remembered to-day only because their names have been made imperishable through his eloquent and time-enduring Epistles.

You all know the story of Parkman's life. Often and often he could not write more than ten minutes at a time. He was for years in darkness, but he lived and worked and made history into books. His work is so well done that it will not need to be done over again. We recall, too, the fact that it was in the limitation of Bedford jail where Bunyan wrote his immortal book. Before his incarceration he was unknown as an author. Afterward, when he had liberty and the freedom to do what he liked, he wrote nothing of the least consequence.

Some time ago our newspapers were full of accounts

relating to the death of a colored man. Now it is most unfortunate to be hampered, as was Paul, by physical limitations; but it is still more unfortunate to be hampered in the race of life by a dark skin.

Frederick Douglass had such a dark skin. More, he was born in slavery, when it was against the law to give an education to one human being, if it chanced that some other human being claimed to be his owner and master. Thousands of white boys under such circumstances might have despaired. Not so with Douglass. Read his biography. It is an inspiration to greater effort. By and by we find him at work in a ship-yard. Then he makes friends here in Massachusetts. He runs away from the bonds that hold him, and the gift that is within stirs and grows as he begins to speak in public.

It was at Nantucket, I believe, where he was given that first opportunity to address an audience. He made so favorable an impression that soon afterwards he was appointed agent of the Anti-slavery Society of this State.

During those stirring days of agitation one might often have seen billed through Western towns the names Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, George William Curtis. Mr. Douglass was paid the same amount of money with the others. He was not favored because he had formerly been a slave, but because of his ability. While he thus travelled from place to place to lecture, he studied hard, and even sat up half the night after an exhaustive evening of speaking, in order again to carefully go over his manuscript.

After he had preached with rare tact and eloquence for Henry Ward Beecher, a white man, an office-holder at that

time, said, in a fit half of enthusiasm, half of condescension, "Mr. Douglass, I am willing to walk with you arm in arm down Broadway." "The question," said Mr. Douglass, "is whether I am willing to walk with you?"

Is the case of Douglass but a single instance?

"When I found that I was black," said Alexandre Dumas, "I resolved to live as if I were white, and so force men to look below my skin." And who to-day in France, in the last half of this century at least, has had greater dramatic influence than the originally despised and unlettered mulatto?

Says Emerson: "For everything you have missed, you have gained something else. For everything you gain, you lose something."

If this be true, then certainly a cramped, hindered life may well be worth the living.

If I could show you this morning that invalids, slaves, prisoners of poverty, exiles, men and women chained and limited by adverse circumstances, have done the best work of the world, possibly you might be better contented with your own seemingly hard burden or narrow opportunity. I think such a thesis not impossible to prove; for at once such names occur to my mind as Epictetus, Dante, Milton, Channing, Lincoln, and the thousands like them. I will ask you, however, to turn from these concrete illustrations to a consideration of the source of supply. How comes it that often the least favorable environment produces the most favorable results? What is the secret of the apparently paradoxical principle which Paul expressed in the words, "When I am weak, then am I strong"?

When we are asked to define our thought of Deity, we say rather glibly that God is Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Infinite. Do we at the same time grasp the tremendous import of these words?

If the spirit of God pervades all things, then that spirit is equally within you, within me, as within all the moving and shifting phenomena of the universe, and potentially, at least, we are stronger than giants, more powerful than kings or emperors, and wiser far than all earthly Solomons. Is this a living fact, or is it a mere dead assertion? Is it literally true that in God we live and move and have our being? If so, what necessarily follows?

Before answering the question, I invite your careful attention to a chain of reasoning which, though somewhat abstract, shall eventually bear on my subject, and, I hope, help to make somewhat clearer our problem of life.

When we look out on the world of nature, we see the waters as they pass from sea to cloud, and then, by condensed evaporation, to rain and stream and sea again; the leaf that drops in autumn, and is renewed in spring; the Gulf Stream that, like a mighty circle, warms the northern and cools the southern seas. These all constitute an order which they do not feel. A power works in and through them by law, and thus holds them to unswerving obedience. Take one step higher. Note the working of law as it takes possession of animal life. In the animal it works as instinct. The beaver that constructively builds its dam; the bee that geometrically arranges the honey-comb; the shad that regularly ascends the fresh-water stream, and intrusts its progeny to the water in which it was itself born,—these

all serve, although unconscious of the Master mind that directs. The ends toward which they work are not known directly by them. When we come to man, what do we see? He, too, on his merely physical side is directed by laws over which he has no control. In other words, if he fail to obey the law of gravity, he will fall; if he is heedless of the law of hydrostatics, he will sink; if he is oblivious of the foul air he is breathing, he will die. On his purely physical side he is as rigidly conditioned as the stars, the sea, the earth. Again, with the animal he shares the common instinctive life. Hunger compels him to eat, love attracts him to others of his kind. His passions, his affections, his whole emotional nature, would draw him, now here, now there, now yonder. "All of omnipotence does not stand at the disposal of human ends." The inexorable order of the universe working for mighty results cannot be put in peril by the wish, the whim, or the prayer of some one human being.

But blessed thought! God has not simply subjected and limited us by the physical laws of worlds. He has not forsaken us after having planted within our natures passions and affections which carry us hither and thither; but, as Martineau truly says, "He has given us of himself his own living spirit, so that within us he whispers of other laws than those which are embodied in our animal organism, and by virtue of which we eat and drink and sleep and wake and laugh and fear and fight." His mind, as it were, addresses itself directly to our minds, telling us of what is good and true and strong and brave and enduring. Here, within, we are not compelled to listen or to obey. Freedom

of will is ours. God shows us our best. It is ours to follow that illumination or walk in darkness.

Now, when life is easy and smooth, we rarely live in our deeper nature. We simply glide adown the years more or less automatically. By fairly well obeying physical laws, we preserve our health and strength; by a certain moderate self-control we bring our emotional nature into tolerable subjection, at least well enough, so that it does not lead us into any great sin or make us play the fool before our fellows.

Our attention is so distracted and our actions so engaged with the customary things which lie upon the surface of the world that it is usually only when we are thrown out of the current of social or business life, and laid aside by sickness or sorrow, that our inner and outer natures meet, and we sink into our real selves in God.

Therefore, it is that for the world's best work we usually have to turn to those who, from the conventional point of view, are deprived of nearly all those things which we unthinkingly suppose are necessary for a proper development of mind and soul.

After this rather long detour we come back again to Paul in prison, and we see how the very freedom of spirit attained is by and through means of the limitation of the body. Paul, with his restless eagerness, had he been free and rich and powerful, would soon have been led into all kinds of disputes with the apostles at Jerusalem. Hurrying here and there over the country, he would have planted unnecessary and ill-considered churches which would have brought Christianity into reproach rather than helped it forward to the universal goal.

Deserted by friends, tied hand and foot as it were, it is only Paul's spirit that is free, and capable of communing with the God consciousness within. Ah! what a difference now is noticeable in his exhortations! There is no scolding or disputatious language. The things of sense are less and less: the things divine are more and more. He rises up and out of the purely local and transitory to the universal and enduring: hence his letters have survived and been read with gladness by the uncounted millions that have lived since his day.

And what is true in the case of Paul was true in the case of Parkman, Milton, Bunyan, or of any one of the others I mentioned in illustration. Thrown out of the current of conventional life, taken away from the distractions of mere things, shut up in the darkness of blindness, confined to a prison cell, limited to a sick-bed, or compelled to rely on inner strength for sustenance and support, one and all, whether consciously or unconsciously, have thus lived in God, and found his infinitude a constant source of supply, up from and out of which they have brought ever new and greater intellectual and spiritual riches.

Here, then, is the lesson I bring you this morning,—the lesson which Paul, after many years, was taught by trial and tribulation and sickness and apparent defeat,—the lesson which he joyfully acknowledges in the words, “When I am weak, then am I strong.”

Possibly it is not a new lesson to you; but, nevertheless, it is one all too likely to be forgotten.

Are you now in prosperity? Do the many claims of soci-

ety and social life largely distract and take up your time? Have you power in commercial circles?

Then reserve for yourself some time in every day when you withdraw from the duties and sense impressions that beat in upon mind and soul, and let the voice within speak. From that infinite source of supply draw larger and larger life, purer desires, nobler ambitions.

All great natures instinctively turn inward.

He whom we to-day call the moral master of mankind learned in the solitude of the wilderness that "we are the temple of the living God," and that within do we partake of his infinite spirit, so that the words "I and my Father are one" stand for a literal truth.

Without such communion what are we? What is there of us worth saving? Apart from this we are as atoms, as mere bits of temporary force swayed and swept along by purely physical laws. Yes, carried now hither, now yon by animal instincts, and in a routine way performing duties which habit has largely made automatic.

But thanks be to pain, to poverty, to neglect by man, to sickness, to all those things which the world calls evil,—thanks be to them, I say, for their beneficent work. They rouse us, they make us think, they stir the depths of our being, they call us away from mere sense impressions, they make us rely upon the inner strength, which is God; and so we grow and grow in fineness, into beauty, in purity, in Christ's likeness.

Ah! it is by the very friction of the steel rails which impedes the onward course of the steam-engine as it puffs and throbs and puts forth of its mighty energy that the train is

held true to the track, and is able to keep upon the narrow path which leads to its destination. It is on account of the resistance offered by the air which compels the bird to exert its inner strength, and in the very flapping and beating back of the air by its wings does it mount higher and higher. Place it in a vacuum where such resistance is reduced to naught, and it at once falls lifeless to the ground.

So I do not wish one struggle less for Lincoln in his boyhood. I do not pray that Milton shall again be given his eyesight; for then he will fail to see the horrors of a Paradise lost, the grandeur of a Paradise regained. I do not ask that the jail couch be made a bit more soft for Bunyan or that the skin of Douglass shall be exchanged for one of pearly whiteness. Neither do I complain that Paul is kept there in prison until he listen to the commanding voice, nor that the very Christ himself had nowhere to lay his head; for by that exile, that freedom from wealth, from property, from Judean office or Roman citizenship, he learned to be not simply "Son of Nazareth," but "Son of man," not locally one of Abraham's children, but universally one of God's.

So, my friends, I do not wish for you one less hardship, one less struggle, one less disappointment, one less sorrow, if indeed it is God's will that thus you shall be led to him.

The law of compensation is true. Gain the whole world, but lose in so doing eternal life. Lose the things men hold dear, be neglected, obscure, of no esteem, if so be, by the honesty of your nature, you come to possess the wealth of an immortal soul. . . .

Why shrink from the *via dolorosa*? By that path are you

to win your spiritual birthright. Why murmur at the hardships? By them are you gaining in strength. Why fear the darkness? In that darkness is One who is the true light,—light for every man born into the world.

Your future waits now upon your decision. . . .

If the Lord be God, follow him; but, if Baäl, then follow him.

Boston Public Library
Central Library, Copley Square

Division of
Reference and Research Services

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 06630 452 6

